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ABSTRACT

To see what students think the title Ms. means, and also to see what implications and impressions they attach to Ms., a study questioned 68 college students (36 female, 32 male) on their best approximations of "dictionary definitions" for the titles Ms., Mr., Mrs., and Miss. Respondents also provided personal connotations for the titles and indicated which title, if any, they preferred to use for themselves. Results indicated that while all students could correctly define the traditional titles Mr., Miss, and Mrs., only about half correctly defined the non-traditional title Ms. Although it was not unusual for connotations of Mr. to include some positive aspect, Ms. and Miss were seen as having more negative connotations. (TD)

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Ms.-Conceptions: Perceived Denotations and Connotations of the Title "Ms."

A. Marie Carney and Mykol C. Hamilton

Women, unlike men, have at least two choices regarding the title of address they would like put before their name--Miss or Ms. for an unmarried woman, Mrs. or Ms. for a married, widowed, or divorced woman. According to several studies, the title a woman chooses for herself may make a difference in how she is perceived and evaluated. Heilman (1975) found that male college and high school students evaluated prospective non-technical university courses as more likely enjoyable and intellectually stimulating when taught by Ms. or Mr. J. R. Erwin or by J. R. Erwin, rather than by Miss or Mrs. J. R. Erwin. Anderson, Finn, and Leider (1981) discovered that high school and college students of both sexes, in rating authoritarian-style leaders, said they would be more willing to be in a subordinate position to a Ms. than a Mr., Mrs., or Miss. According to Dion (1987), a woman who uses the title Ms. is seen by both sexes as more dynamic, socially assertive, and motivated toward achievement, as well as less interpersonally warm and having less likelihood of fulfilling "interpersonal goals." Another interesting finding (Connor, Byrne, Mindell, Cohen, & Nixon, 1986) is that women who use the title Ms. are seen as less honest than women who use a more traditional title or no title at all.

What underlying definitions and interpretations of the titles of address might explain such differences?

Method

In the present study, 68 college students (36 female, 32 male) completed a questionnaire in which they gave their best approximations of "dictionary definitions" for the titles Ms., Mr., Mrs., and Miss. The titles were presented in four Latin square randomized orders to avoid order effects. Respondents also provided personal connotations for the titles and indicated which title, if any, they preferred to use for themselves. It was felt that these direct measures of people's understanding of and preference for these terms would be a first step toward understanding what underlies the previously documented positive and negative biases toward Ms.

Results

About half the students (52.94%) gave definitions for Ms. that were essentially correct--saying Ms. is the female equivalent of Mr., or that it refers to all women regardless of marital status. In contrast, 100% of respondents correctly defined Miss, although about a third mentioned youth as either a correlate of (11.7%) or a requirement for (20.6%) use of that title. Mrs. was defined by 100% of students as the title for a married woman, with a few adding that it could also apply to a divorced or

widowed woman. All respondents defined Mr. correctly.

The most frequent errors made in defining Ms. were that the title indicated that a woman was divorced (29.4% of total respondents) or unmarried (19.1%). Four other errors were made by several people each. Ms. indicates youth (7.4%), widowhood (7.4%), older age (5.9%), or a career/professional woman (4.4%).

Connotations of all four titles abound; the following were the most frequently mentioned.

For Ms., divorced was mentioned again by 26.4% of the respondents, 30.8% thought Ms. connoted an unmarried or never-married woman, 20.6% believed older women use Ms., 14.7% associated Ms. with feminism. Grouping together all connotations that seemed negatively loaded (e. g., one person each said "old maid" and "against society"), 25% of all respondents gave such connotations.

Connotations for Mr. were very bland. Not one person mentioned a negative association; 20.6% said again that Mr. refers to a male or adult male and gave no other "connotations," 17.6% said it's a "neutral" term. In sharp contrast to Ms., the literal female equivalent title to Mr., 22% mentioned that Mr. is a title of respect--none did so for Ms.

Most connotations for Mrs. simply reiterated that it refers to married women. In contrast to Mr., only 4.4% noted that Mrs. is a term of respect.

Negative connotations were very infrequent (3%).

Miss was closely associated again in connotations with youth (64.7%) and an unmarried state (38.2%), with 17.6% mentioning both. No one used the term "respect" in association with Miss, but one person (1.5%) said it is a "polite" form of address. Innocence and virginity was a somewhat popular theme (8.8%). Negative connotations such as prissy, bad, and immature were mentioned by 25% of the respondents, while Miss was described as good by only 7.4% and neutral by 7.4% also. Seven students (10.3%) noted that Miss takes on more negative connotations as a woman ages.

Respondents were asked their own preference for title of address. Forty-seven percent of women and 59% of men preferred not to use a title. Of those choosing a title, of course all men chose Mr. We looked at preferences among women who chose a title in two ways--first, overall: 15 preferred Miss and 4 preferred Ms. Then we looked at preferences broken down by understanding of the term Ms. That is, we looked separately at those who had defined Ms. correctly vs. incorrectly. All nine women defining Ms. incorrectly preferred Miss; but among those giving correct definitions, six preferred Miss, and 4 chose Ms.

Discussion

While all students surveyed could correctly define the traditional

titles Mr., Miss, and Mrs., only about half correctly defined the non-traditional title Ms. None of the female titles solicited many positive connotations, with Ms. having the least. It was not unusual, however, for connotations of Mr. to include some positive aspect. Ms. and Miss were seen as having more negative connotations than other titles; while Mrs. and Mr. had the least number of negative connotations. Of the women who use a title of address, the majority prefer Miss, with a few choosing Ms. It may be noted that all of the women who chose Ms. as their personal address gave correct definitions of that title.

That many students could not correctly define Ms. may be related to the fact that very few of the women respondents use this title to refer to themselves. It could be the case that lack of use of the term causes a lack of knowledge of its true meaning. Of course, the opposite could also be true; not knowing the real meaning of the term Ms. may cause students not to use it. Further research is needed to determine causal links.

The abundance of negative connotations and lack of positive connotations for Ms. may be due to many factors including negative stereotyping of the title Ms. by the media.

Past research can be viewed in light of the present study. Previous studies have indicated that the title Ms. may work to a woman's advantage in a technical or business setting (Dion & Schuller, 1990). respondents

prefer to work with a Ms. in a situation where the person in question is called upon to be a "boss," an authoritarian leader, or the teacher of a technical subject. These are all traditionally male realms, and the present study indicates that many students see a Ms. as having stereotypically masculine characteristics such as independence and strength. Whereas previous studies examined titles of address in a particular context, the present study had respondents discuss titles in an abstract manner, out of any specific context. If respondents had been asked about a Ms. in a personal setting, their responses indicate that they might have seen a Ms. as less warm and less skilled at personal interaction than a woman using another title, which parallels Dion's findings (1987).

Considering the high proportion of people with negative associations to both Ms. and Miss, young women students are not left with very attractive alternatives for a title of address. The greater preference for Miss may parallel the choice of the women at the particular campus studied to refer to themselves as girls rather than women. Women students may choose the terms Miss and girl because these titles are associated with youth and because other people refer to them in that manner. Ms., on the other hand, has connotations of strength and independence that these young women may not be ready to take on.

The main purposes of this survey were to see what students think Ms.

means, and also to see what implications and impressions they attach to Ms. Our findings suggest that students are not uniformly clear in their understanding of the term, and that they have mixed feelings about its connotations.

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